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ABSTRACT

Computer technology (primarily word processing) enables the student of public relations writing to improve the writing process through increased flexibility in writing, enhanced creativity, increased support of management skills and team work. A new instructional model for computer use in public relations courses at Purdue University Calumet (Indiana) is designed around four objectives: (1) to make the computer disappear as a machine; (2) to view the computer as another tool; (3) to use the computer as a management tool to support, enhance, and improve writing; and (4) to enhance creativity in the classroom. Writing assignments given in class are completed in open computing laboratories staffed with professional consultants. Student evaluations have been very positive, and agencies and corporations report that students who have taken the course produce highly professional work and have been hired on the basis of their unique computer experience. The emphasis should be on using the computer as a tool rather than learning computer programming. (Thirteen references are attached.) (RS)

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BEYOND THEORY: IMPROVING PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING THROUGH COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to current assumptions, public relations is being taught more frequently in communication(s) departments than in other departments housing public relations course offerings. With writing courses less tied to journalism, the potential for developing flexible and creative public relations writing, other than news writing, will further professional growth. Proposed here is an instructional model for integrating computer technology into the public relations writing assignments. The results focus on enhancing creativity and flexibility in writing, developing managerial skills in handling team writing assignments, and learning a marketable expertise for later career advancement in public relations.

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BEYOND THEORY: IMPROVING PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING THROUGH COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY

The public relations professional faces complex writing situations. The formats vary from pitch letters, public service announcements to newsletters. A style of writing has evolved which no longer represents primarily, if at all, the journalism type of news reporting. The model public relations curriculum put forth by the Public Relations Society of American and the Association of Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication emphasizes similarly the need for a variety of public relations writing abilities. The public relations writing courses for undergraduates "should be different from other writing courses (e.g., news writing, script writing) . . . and the variety of styles, formats, and structures" marks the various public relations approaches (Ehling, 1986).

A 1988 review of 3,201 university and college catalogs identified 578 departments (communication, journalism, mass communication, business and public relations) offering public relations courses. The review of catalogs further established communication departments as the leader in number of courses offered, including a significant number of writing courses (Hazleton and Botan, 1988). With communication departments leading in the educational effort,

an instructional model supporting a flexible, managerial, and creative approach to writing is important. Furthermore, since communication departments are not tied to the tradition of journalism, the opportunity to integrate a writing tool which better reflects the communication process in public relations is a significant transition for the profession.

Building Public Relations Writing Experiences Around the Computer: Another Tool for the Educator

Computer science is ranked as last by educators and public relations professionals among a list of minors for public relations students (Commission, 1987). However, in the technology emphasis described here computers remain a critial tool for the public relations writer--not an end in itself. Furthermore, the use of computers is not viewed as technical support for agency/corporate business, as in billing or information retrieval, but more as a tool for writing.

An advantage in using computer technology for writing is in the power the machine has to remove the labor intensive act and to liberate the writers's ability to soar at the pace of one's mind. One can truly brainstorm in a highly flexible and unrestricted manner. Fred Gibbons, President of Software Publishing Corporation, summarized: "The personal computer is a powerful and important machine

for one simple reason--when I am using it, it is an extension of what I think about and the way I express my ideas" (McKeown, 1986).

The model of instructional approach proposed here is viewed as using the computer in terms of the functions served by the pencil, the typewriter, and dictionary, if not replacing these items in many instances. The computer fades into the background and becomes what it should be for the public relations writers--a tool.

Proposed here is an application of computer technology (word processing primarily) to enhance public relations writing. Specifically computer technology enables the student to improve the writing process through increased flexibility in writing, enhanced creativity, with increased support of management skills (editing, time limits, rewrites) and team work.

Public Relations Writing and Computers--A Natural Blend.

Presently the computer is presented in public relations textbooks primarily in terms of equipment. More recently in Walsh's Public Relations Writer in a Computer Age the author mentions the advantages of the computer in terms of a time saving device (Wash, 1986). In Walsh's worktext the concept

of the computer is clearly established as making the public relations professional's life easier by reducing writing time. Writing assignments that "take hours are now completed in minutes" (Wash, Worktext, 1986).

More than saving time, the varied skills and techniques demanded in public relations writing adapts most readily to the computer. Perhaps Frank E. X. Dance best stated the essence of the computer: "If we envision the brain as the hardware, then knowledge may be considered software" (Dance, 1985). Having the knowledge organized into software is a powerful tool for the public relations student. And "technology simply provides better and more exciting tools for human communication" (Crow, 1986). Here two approaches to the instructional process for integrating computers into public relations writing assignments is presented: 1) an overview of the philosophy and objectives developed for teaching writing on computers and 2) a further explication of the model through a review of three years of teaching experience utilizing computer laboratories for public relations writing.

Philosophy. In the process of writing via the computer without much cognitive introduction, breakdowns or problems (referred to as throwness) occur. The throwness, the lack of knowing, shows up (Heidegger, 1962). A basis for more computer knowledge is thus motivated by the breakdown or lack of information. This switches the need for knowledge from the teacher as a cognitive process to a need created

solely by the student within a particular context (the writer senses a need to review what s/he has written and now needs instruction on which key to push to get to the beginning of the document). By allowing the individual student to create the context, the student is not overwhelmed with irrelevant information or experiencing imposed information overload. Now the student has the opportunity to seek information pertinent to his or her needs. The integration of the computer with the writing process, lessening the cognitive emphasis, allows the public relations student to experience technology primarily as a tool assisting the writer.

The process for encouraging the awareness of knowledge is similar to how our learning shows up in other situations. New Yorkers, for example, do not have as many names for snow as the Eskimos. People in New York do have a variety of snow conditions but do not have problems or breakdowns with snow like the Eskimos do. The concept of "snow" shows up in language more frequently because survival depends on the need for the Eskimo to have more knowledge about snow conditions. In the same way the student is encouraged to have problems or breakdowns so that the need for knowing more about computer usage shows up in the context of personal needs. The student discerns, for example, whether a breakdown is one that is simply a lack of knowledge (how does one turn on the screen) or a mechanical problem (loose connection and the instructor is needed to check out the

contact points). As the student experiences more and more the possibilities of writing on the computer, the languaging grows.

Learning the usage of the computer is not, then, based in a rationalistic or cognitive approach initially. Viewing the computer usage from a Heidegger perspective radically alters training orientation on the computers. The assumptions emphasized by Heidegger, Winograd and Flores emphasize:

1. Knowing will never be complete or logical.
2. Applied knowledge is more fundamental than theory, therefore, one must go beyond a theoretical point-of-view.
3. Our cognitive labeling is not the primary way we relate in the learning process.
4. Learning is cast in a social matrix and is not an unique property of the individual (Heidegger, 1962; Winograd and Flores, 1986).

This philosophical purview guides the development of specific objectives in terms of the role of the computer in the instruction, the treatment of the computer as a professional tool, the similation of professional public relations writing conditions, and the synergistic effect of the interaction between the writer and the computer.

Objectives. The integration of the computer in the public relations curriculum is designed around four objectives:

Objective One: To make the computer disappear as a machine. For example, one does not need to know about your carburetor and fuel ejection systems to drive a car. This is also true about computers. One does not need to know about baud and bytes to effectively utilize computers.

Objective Two: The computer is viewed as a tool like one's typewriter or pencil. The purpose is to develop a sense of the computer as being essential to one's work and indispensable under a variety of conditions. The student is made aware there are powerful capabilities in using a computer that could never be accomplished by using a pencil or typewriter. The sense of the computer as another tool to add to his/her collection of public relations tools is very important.

Objective Three: The computer is utilized as a management tool which supports, enhances, and improves one's writing output. Viewing the computer as more efficient and flexible than traditional writing tools, enables the student to simulate team efforts in the real world, for example, peer editing, working under deadlines for final copy, or creating several versions of writing exercises for meeting different organizational needs.

Objective Four: The computer is utilized in a way that enhances more creativity in the classroom. Now the students have a tool which can flow as fast as their thoughts. A tool which assists editing and provides the student instant feedback on writing development. All these possibilities

frees the student to explore and to reach new levels of creativity. In the act of "computing" the student experiences the tremendous possibilities the computer allows in the writing experience.

The public relations student may not initially see computer technology as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Here the computer is treated as a tool simply used to improve writing skills and production. The approach applied to linking writing with technology is grounded in the "skills for doing" rather than describing (Meussling, 1986). The theory behind the training approach is lodged in the analogy of the hammer. Where one will not learn the ability to act from the "knowledge of a hammer" but from "your familiarity with hammering" (Winograd and Flores, 1986). The public relations student learns writing by using the computer in lieu of studying the computer per se, for example:

> The computer does not radically alter the shape or thrust of what they are doing. Rather, it allows them to continue with previous work--perhaps more efficiently and more precisely. When used in this way, the computer fades into the background. The viewer of the work does not know that a computer was involved. The role of the typewriter in the writer's art is a good analogy. We as readers usually have no idea what kind of typewriter the writer used. While helping

writers to do their work, the typewriter's effects are transparent to us" (Wilson, 1986).

A Model for Integrating Computers with Public Relations Writing Assignments

For three years computer usage in PR writing assignments has resulted in more frequent and varied opportunities in public relations writing experiences on the undergraduate level. Testing this noncognitive instructional approach in an applied setting was successful in terms of immediate students feedback and later field experience (internships and entry-level employment).

Computer Training. Opportunities and requirements for computer training has yet to be realized as a serious requirement in public relations programs. In the 578 departments offering public relations courses, less than one percent had a computer course or required computer expertise. Most mentioned typing ability, a typical journalism requirement. The few computer courses were clearly not adapted to the liberal arts students and the description read like typical computer oriented course content.

Several conditions seem important for a successful blend of computers with public relations writing assignments. Communication departments should have access

to computer laboratories where each student has a computer available. Laboratories should have copies of the software for each computer station. The instruction should be focused on the computer as a tool not as computer science. For example, at Purdue University Calumet (Hammond, Indiana), which has the best equipped computer laboratories for a college its size in the United States, the IBM computer laboratories are equipped to handle the maximum number of students enrolled (28 students is the limit). The communication students receive their initiation to the computer in the public relations classes. Very few come with previous exposure and often report a negative experience.

Early in the semester two 90 minute periods were held in the instructional lab for training on word processing software. Each student is asked to bring a two-sided, double density disk. The lab is equipped with multicopies of Micro-soft Word which includes a spelling checker function. The training requires immediate word processing action rather than a "how-to-do-it" lecture on the IBM-PC. In effect, turning the computer on is like switching a light on, the monitor is viewed as the screen on your television set, and one's keyboard is your typewriter. And in the case of a computer, your disk is your paper files. Similar analogies are developed throughout the first introductory experience. New material is introduced when the student asks--"what do I have to do to be able to type this:" So

avoiding information overload and jargon is a welcomed experience. The students are not asked to buy a manual to the software process but are provided, if requested, a two-page, step-by-step, procedure on the basic essentials for a) formatting, b) getting into a document, c) saving a document, d) printing, and e) exiting the document. A keyed grid of the keyboard functions is placed around the typing pad to assist each student individually during the labs. The students are less intimidated about computers if only the basic actions necessary to use the computer are presented. The usage of computers for word processing is relatively a liberal arts interest. Word processing was the last interest of the computer consultants who operated in a highly technical oriented university.

Assignments. The first computer lab assignment is a writing exercise focused on brainstorming and thus avoids the pressures of producing final copy. Instead the assignment utilizes the freedom of the brainstorming process. Here the computer is an incredible support system. One can type as fast as one thinks. In a brainstorming approach, one has less concern about the writing details, the students are given a chance to relax and push their ideas beyond the usual stopping point. One aspect stressed is not to think but to keep one's fingers moving. The physical action of entering data in the keyboard stimulates the mind to fill the screen with words (Goldberg, 1986).

The second lab experience assures that each student has at least one supervised experience on the computer using the word processing software. Those students which are more comfortable with the equipment can begin to play with some of the keyboard options. The brainstorming assignment continues.

Writing assignments beyond class instruction are completed in open laboratories where lab consultants are available. The following features of the writing effort are stressed and enhanced:

1. Brainstorming sessions on the computer are used to deemphasize writing, allowing students to become familiar with the computer. At least two sessions focus on brainstorming with the instructor responding to the breakdowns in computer usage. The instructor needs to feel very comfortable with the computer hardware and software as the students problems will range widely.

2. A very short and simple news release assignment introduces the students to the idea of multiple copies for peer and instructor review and editing. Editing is less of a chore when not handwritten and the students experienced more interaction with the class when at least three people are reviewing their work. The edited copies are returned for a rewrite and the news release is now stored in the directory.

3. Students experience ease in developing management skills in the writing process. Students are in charge of

initial creation of the messsage, printing the writing assignment, contacting editors and distributing multicopies, rewriting, and assessing development while at the same time increasing writing production. Each stage is made easier because of the computer.

4. Students more fully complete assignments (more feedback) and can accomplish more assignments under time limitations with the computer. Consequently, more management experience is gained.

5. Students easily update their record of goals and objectives for their "to do list" and provide a "log of activities" weekly. Weekly records can be shared with other classmates or teams.

6. Students revise a writing assignment for a variety of formats: a pitch letter, a news feature, a broadcast announcement. For example, the students design three versions of one public service announcement--10 seconds, 30 seconds, and 60 seconds format by simple duplication of the basic idea with further editing and development. Such savings on time often allows students time to read their PSA to students, a technique which develops the listening for oral phrasing of messages.

7. Students produce multiple copies of progress reports, final reports, etc. for team members, client, and instructor.

8. Students use the spelling checker and create their own "red-flag dictionary" of words they frequently misspell (errors can be a faulty typing habit, too).

The ease with which the computer enables the student to accomplish these tasks is compared to past classes where the computers were not available and students were not providing as many rewrites. Often the problem of deciphering strange handwriting was a task in itself, multiple copies were not easy to obtain, and proofreading was difficult. The concept of working together as a team is more readily instilled with computer support.

Evaluation. Purdue's computerized confidential teacher evaluation is a cafeteria process administered by students. The students handle the logistics of filing the student evaluations of teaching effectiveness with the proper university staff. Core questions are standardized at the central university (West Lafayette). Students rate teaching effectiveness on a scale of 1.00 to 5.00 (5.00 is the best possible score) with responses coded on Scantron sheets. Besides the core question where 155 students indicated at a level of 4.63 a desire to take the public relations courses again, the students were asked to respond to open-ended questions on their computer experiences for writing assignments. These anonymous student responses are reproduced here to illustrate the diversity of experiences with public relations writing on computers.

"The computer is better than typing because if you made a mistake you can just delete it on the computer or you can move a whole sentence or paragraph to another spot. Plus, you can save all your ideas on your disk and bring it back up any time."

"The computer allows the PR person to be creative and see what the final product would look like before handing it in. This way, needed changes can be made."

"I think the computer is helpful in getting assignments done and revisions made. It's also helpful in making a large number of copies when needed. The course has made me aware of what lies ahead for me out in the working world and intrigues me on what to expect from advanced PR."

"The computer is a tool that speeds up everything to such a degree that it gives us a chance to do so much more in the same amount of time."

"Using the computer adds a feeling of professionalism to our assignments."

"The computer has helped my confidence and to the PR person it speeds things up."

"The access to the IBM personal computer has been critical to this class with the constant revision that goes on in PR writing. The computer saves time which is definitely an important commodity. Don't take away access to the computer!!" (sic)

"The computer is the right hand of the PR manager."

"They (computers) always intimidated me and I know that wherever you go, computers are there. This is the kind of "real life" training that can be utilized in any field--unlike so many college courses."

"The computer allows my ideas to flow freely. It's an immense help in organizing, brainstorming, and perfecting my final works, all skills that are crucial to a successful PR person."

"Any person entering an organization these days will almost definitely have to work on a computer. The exposure to one in this class will look good on a resumes and give valuable experience."

The few negative voices about computer usage reflected our commuter campus life style. If one is not on campus and commutes for only one or two classes, completing your work on a computer is a hassle, particularly if there are

breakdowns (for example, a student forgetting to save data on their disk). I have in these instances allowed some assignments to be completed on a typewriter stressing that the entire sequence courses will be utilizing computer technology.

Computer usage enables the public relations major to reach new and higher levels of accomplishment in a variety of writing formats while giving the students an edge in the job market. Agencies and corporations report that Purdue Calumet students have produced highly professional work as interns (using university computers to complete projects), have been hired because of their unique computer experience, and have essentially more skills to offer in the entry-level position.

THE ROLE OF COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

A review of the college and university catalogs suggests that computer experiences need to be more frequently integrated into the public relations curriculum. The responsibility cannot be easily answered by requiring a computer science course. The emphasis should be on using the computer as a tool and not presented as computer science. Requiring a computer science course may be defeating the purpose for the communication student in public relations.

A model of computer instruction for public relations writing, especially as a tool, is important for many reasons. For example, flexibility, creativity, management of the writing process, and teamwork simulating the reality of public relations activities are especially strong skills developed via computers. Students experienced in writing via computers are significantly more marketable for internships and entry-level positions.

Lastly, a model focusing on computer applications for improving public relations writing may be the evidence needed to convince your department to integrate computers into the public relations curriculum. The same example may demonstrate the need for the technical sciences to share their computer technology resources with departments of communication.

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